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AUTHOR Trotter, Sonie
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ABSTRACT

The shortage of qualified school counselors in the past few years has been a concern of the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Efforts to address this issue were largely contingent on encouraging students to enter counselor-training programs. Recent research pointed to the fact that a large number of counselors were choosing not to go into school counseling. One response was for Missouri to revamp the counselor certification requirements; however, a strong advocacy program seemed to be a better solution. This document explains how a task force made up of the Missouri DESE, counselor educators, and officers of the Missouri School Counselor Association drafted an advocacy plan. The tasks facing this committee were: (1) what audiences should be addressed; (2) how to approach each of these audiences; (3) who would be responsible; and (4) what the time line would be. A copy of this plan is appended. (JDM)

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by

Sonie Trotter

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Chapter Ten

An Aggressive Advocacy Plan: *The State Counselor Association Response to Events in Missouri*

Sonie Trotter
Cabool Schools R-IV, Cabool, Missouri

The Missouri School Counselor Association (MSCA) has long realized the value of advocating for school counselors and comprehensive guidance programs, but several events in recent years have made that need for advocacy even greater. A continuing shortage of qualified school counselors in the state of Missouri, with projections of an even larger future shortage, is certainly a concern for the profession. That shortage has prompted a number of responses, including efforts to fill positions and increased efforts to discover the causes of the shortage. In addition, the current trends in education toward accountability, budgetary constraints on local school districts, and changes in counselor certification have increased the need in Missouri to pursue an aggressive advocacy plan.

The shortage of qualified school counselors has been a concern for several years. According to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) *Core Data Report* (2001), in the 2000–01 school year there were 129 unfilled or vacant counseling positions, with 231 unqualified individuals working as counselors and 284 individuals with provisional certificates holding school counseling positions. Efforts to address this problem in Missouri have largely centered on an incentive program to encourage students to enter counselor training programs, but a recent study at Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri (Woolridge, 1999) revealed that a large number of counselors were choosing not to go into school counseling, and advocacy could assist not only in encouraging individuals to enter a counselor training program but also to use that education to become a school counselor.

As in the rest of the country, the trend in Missouri toward accountability has also made advocacy a priority. Missouri has long been a leader in the area

of comprehensive guidance programs, with 97% of school districts reporting to DESE full implementation of a comprehensive guidance program. The task of school counselors now becomes educating others about the significant benefits and results of comprehensive guidance programs (Lapan, Gysbers, & Sun, 1997). Missouri's accreditation program, called the Missouri School Improvement Program (MSIP), runs on a five-year cycle, and counselor input on the standards and indicators must be strong and remain strong through advocacy.

Budgetary constraints on schools in Missouri have often resulted in counselors providing non-guidance services, which takes time away from the guidance program. Although implementation of comprehensive guidance programs appear to have greatly reduced counselors' participation in non-guidance duties, advocacy remains vital in this area as well. Pointing out the importance of school counselors and their programs must be a goal for our state association.

Partly in response to the concern over the counseling shortage, Missouri recently revamped the counselor certification requirements. Advocacy becomes very important when issues such as certification are being considered. The concern is that counselors' objections will not be heard, certification will be watered down, and school counseling will suffer as a result. A strong program of advocacy seems to be the best solution.

Missouri's Advocacy Plan

Missouri has an unusually strong partnership between the DESE, counselor educators from the 14 institutions offering counseling programs, and MSCA. The need for a more aggressive advocacy plan was noted by representatives from all these organizations at about the same time. As the representative of more than 2,000 of the 2,675 school counselors employed in Missouri (DESE, 2000), MSCA was given the task of developing a new advocacy plan. Although MSCA has always considered advocacy an important task and has had various plans in place for the last 25 years, the recent events in Missouri created the need for a new, more complete and aggressive advocacy plan.

A draft plan was developed by a small committee of people composed of representatives from DESE; counselor educators; and several officers, governing board members, and past presidents of MSCA. The tasks facing the committee were to decide (a) what audiences should be addressed, (b) how to approach each of these audiences, (c) who would be responsible, and (d) what the time line would be. Once the plan was drafted, it was brought to the governing board for input and approval. Then the task of implementation began and continues today. A copy of the plan is provided in a chapter appendix.

The task of identifying the audience was accomplished quickly. School counselors in Missouri were the first priority, but the list also included administrators, school board members, legislators, parents, and community members. The list expanded to include specific groups such as chambers of commerce and the Lions Club, but those groups fit under the general heading of community.

Addressing these groups has been an ongoing task. Some ideas have worked well, others have not been as successful. The inclusion of school counselors may seem unnecessary, but MSCA discovered that many counselors were unsure of how to advocate for themselves, and although most seemed to be implementing comprehensive guidance programs, they were often at a loss when asked to explain those programs and their benefits. DESE has made available a brochure entitled *Guidance and Placement in Missouri Schools* (DESE, 2000), which counselors have found helpful for sharing with teachers, administrators, and school board members. A software presentation for counselors to use with various audiences is in the works, and MSCA has developed a series of very effective one-page policy briefs, including one for administrators, one for school board members, and one for legislators. These ideas have been shown to work.

Approaching legislators has been a challenge. MSCA provided doughnuts and juice in the lobby of the capitol for a number of years. Although the secretaries and office workers really enjoyed this service, it soon became obvious that legislators were not greatly influenced. The new plan calls for a counselor to make direct contact with every legislator, through either a visit or a personal note. A reception would be another option for reaching many legislators, but budgetary constraints have prevented MSCA from taking this step.

Administrators have been reached through their regional meeting and by sending the joint DESE and MSCA newsletter to superintendents across the state. Plans are being made to attend all the state conferences. For years MSCA representatives have attended state conferences and mounted display boards there. The new plan calls for presenting workshops, and a committee of former MSCA presidents is working on workshop ideas.

The advocacy plan calls for presentations to audiences all over the state, and scheduling these, getting on the agendas of various meetings, and finding the personnel to make the presentations are all ongoing concerns. As always, money and time remain a stumbling block for Missouri counselors.

Missouri is fortunate in many ways. We have a strong commitment to comprehensive guidance programs; a wonderful partnership between DESE, counselor educators, and MSCA; a program of evaluation (MSIP) that includes standards for counseling; and a very strong state association. But even with all these advantages, school counselors must continue to advocate for the profession.

The shortage of qualified counselors, budget cuts, legislative decisions concerning funding and qualifications, and our position in schools all demand that we have a strong and vital voice in our community. The future of our children is directly related to the strength of our voice.

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About the Author

Sonie Trotter is the director of guidance for Cabool R-IV Schools in Cabool, Missouri. Prior to that she was a middle school counselor, a high school speech and drama teacher, and a university instructor. She has been professionally active at the state level in Missouri, including a term as president of the Missouri School Counselor Association. In addition, she has served on the Missouri State Guidance Advisory and Program Revision Committees. She can be reached at Cabool Schools R-IV, 1025 Rogers Street, P.O. Box 613, Cabool, Missouri 65689.

Appendix: Advocacy Plan for Missouri School Counselor Association

MSCA has developed a plan for sharing information concerning the critical work of school counselors within comprehensive guidance programs in enhancing student achievement and development, as well as in collaborating with administrators and parents. School counselors are essential in providing a safe environment and enabling students to learn skills toward becoming productive citizens, including career and social development skills, as well as providing skills which can establish emotional stability.

Goals

1. Educate 100% of the school counselors in Missouri concerning the benefits and importance of school counselors and comprehensive guidance programs.
2. Reach 100% of the administrators in Missouri with information concerning comprehensive guidance programs and the role they play in school districts.
3. Share information with 100% of the local boards of education concerning the critical work of school counselors and comprehensive guidance programs.
4. Reach 100% of the state legislators in Missouri concerning the benefits and importance of school counselors and comprehensive guidance programs.
5. Educate Parent-Teacher Organizations, including advisory boards.
6. Secure the support of MSTA and NEA and other teacher groups in Missouri by sharing information concerning the impact comprehensive programs have on student achievement, as well as other benefits for students and teachers.
7. Contact chambers of commerce to share information regarding comprehensive guidance programs and the benefits for the business community.
8. Contact service organizations, such as Kiwanis, Rotary, etc., with information concerning comprehensive guidance programs and their importance.
9. Educate 100% of the counselor educators and counseling students in the area of comprehensive school guidance programs and their importance and benefits, as well as techniques for advocating for these programs.

Plan and Strategies

Year One—This first year MSCA will target three major groups, while beginning to contact all groups. The major emphasis will be:

1. Counselors in the state of Missouri

   Strategies:

   a. Continue education through workshops emphasizing the importance and benefits of comprehensive programs.
   b. Develop presentations for counselor use in helping to explain comprehensive guidance programs
   c. Develop a poster, to be distributed at the state conference and through district meetings, explaining comprehensive guidance programs.

2. Administrators

   Strategies:

   a. Give presentations to state, district, and individual groups by dedicated and passionate counselors.
   b. Distribute briefs (already developed).

3. Legislators

   Strategies:

   a. Distribute briefs (already developed).
   b. Legislative Day—include a personal appointment and contact with each legislator by a counselor from his/her area. Provide all counselors with a step-by-step instruction sheet. If unable to meet a personal note can be left. Make the presence of school counselors felt and take time to educate. Follow up with a letter. Be sure to contact legislators known to be supportive.
   c. Begin to lay the groundwork for much-needed legislation concerning funding and support by contacting supporters.
   d. Involve the media as much as possible.

Year Two—While continuing to work with the groups listed under Year One, MSCA will target three new groups.

1. School boards

   Strategies:

   a. Presentations will be given to all boards by dividing districts and making a commitment to reaching 100% of the districts personally.
   b. Speakers bureau will be made available to all districts for use by communities or boards.
   c. Posters, briefs, and brochures will be distributed to all local boards.

d. Continued display of the MSCA exhibit at the state conference.

2. Educational groups

   Strategies:

   a. Presentations to local and district groups concerning comprehensive guidance and its role in the school
   b. Distribution of material at state conferences and district meetings.
   c. Making the speakers bureau available for PDC committees.
   d. Billboards and TV announcements

3. Parent groups

   Strategies:

   a. Work with advisory and parent groups.
   b. Brochures and newsletters
   c. Speakers bureau

Year Three—As we continue work with the previous groups, this year we will target these groups:

1. Community members
2. Service groups
3. Businesses
4. Labor unions

Strategies will include presentations, billboards, media announcements, personal contacts, brochures, and newsletter articles. We will continually work on plans to focus on these groups, while keeping up with the other targeted groups. As we continue with this project, MSCA will involve more and more groups in assisting counselors in spreading the word concerning school comprehensive guidance programs and their importance.